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AUTHOR Thornton, Stephen J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper has two purposes: (1) to describe how qualitative studies, drawing on educational criticism, have thrown into relief some salient features of curriculum and instruction in social studies; and (2) to compare and contrast the current reform proposal to upgrade geography education. The qualitative studies that are reviewed are the McCutcheon Study (1981) on elementary school teachers' planning, the Rogers and Uhrmacher report (1986) on citizenship education, and the Thornton study (in press) on the relationships between what teachers plan to teach, what ensues in the classroom, and what students learn. The second issue, geography education, is discussed through an analysis of discipline-based geography, and the Thornton and Wenger study is compared to the above studies on educational criticism. The findings from the Thornton and Wenger study indicate that teachers teach social studies rather than geography as a discipline with attention focused on sequential learning and concepts. Educational criticism appraises educators of what is being taught and how instruction is conducted while it assures that policy and practice are mutually informed. A 27-item bibliography is included. (DJC)

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CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE OF CURRICULUM IN PRACTICE:

THE CASE OF SOCIAL STUDIES

by

Stephen J. Thornton

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University of Delaware
College of Education
Newark, DE 19716

Critical Knowledge of Curriculum in Practice: The Case of Social Studies (1)

Stephen J. Thornton
University of Delaware

Consider the following long-standing issues in social studies education:

- Teachers do not appear to recognize the connection between passive, rote learning and apparent student apathy towards social studies (Shaver, Davis, and Helburn, 1978, p. 13).
- There is widespread concern that Americans' ignorance of geography may hamper the nation's welfare and strength in an increasingly interdependent world (Committee on Geographic Education, 1984).
- Although teachers identify reasoning as a priority, their tests focus on recall of memorized information (Goodlad, 1984, p. 212).

These seemingly perennial issues in social studies education have typically been identified through means such as surveys, student testing, examination of curriculum documents, and occasionally via qualitative methods, especially ethnography. After Frederick Erickson (1986, p. 119), I include under qualitative methods approaches called ethnographic, participant observational, case study, symbolic interactionist, phenomenological, constructivist, and interpretive. To Erickson's list, however, I shall add educational criticism which aspires to reeducate the reader's perception of some educational phenomenon (see Eisner, 1985).

In this paper, I shall focus on what qualitative methods, particularly qualitative methods based on or influenced by educational criticism, have contributed to our understanding of social studies education. My intention is not to exhaustively consider the range of problems and possibilities in social studies but rather to attend to selected issues that are central to the quality of social studies programs such as the enduring gap between the ambitious goals identified in curriculum rationales and day-to-day curriculum practices.

As I have noted, issues such as rote learning of factual information and geographic illiteracy are not new. Nor are calls for curriculum reform. Nonetheless, it is clear that social studies practice has been extraordinarily resistant to change (Hertzberg, 1981). For example, the evidence suggests that the much-vaunted New Social Studies movement of the 1960's, for all its innovative curricula and plethora of publications in social studies journals, did little to affect entrenched instructional and curriculum patterns in the schools (Haas, 1977).

In the aftermath of a "new" social studies that did not find its way into the nation's classrooms, researchers tried to understand why social studies practice is so stable. Why, after decades of calls for reform, do the old patterns persist? Answers to such questions require scrutiny of the taken-for-granted culture of schooling. In other words, researchers increasingly attended to the commonplaces of schools, classrooms, and the broader American culture. Significantly, for the purposes of this paper, it became clear that an informed appreciation of social studies practice entailed

examination of the daily grind of classrooms: How do teachers make sense of social studies curriculum and instruction? It is, after all, teachers who ultimately determine the fate of curriculum changes.

For all this fresh interest in events behind the classroom door, however, what we have learned about the daily grind of social studies classrooms remains quite limited. Writing in the third edition of the Handbook of Research on Teaching (1986), Beverly J. Armento reports that there are still few studies which adopt a "holistic" approach to social studies classrooms (p. 948). Indeed, much of the available qualitative research on social studies can be characterized as "accidental" social studies research. That is, the research was not conducted primarily to address the most central social studies education concerns--curriculum and instruction in the schools (Shaver, 1988)--but rather for some other purpose such as how teachers "get" students to work, and differential socialization according to class, race, and gender (see White 1985). These issues, although pertinent to curriculum and instruction in the schools, are only indirectly useful for addressing issues such as those listed at the beginning of this paper.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall deal with three matters. First, I shall describe how qualitative studies drawing on educational criticism have thrown into relief some salient features of curriculum and instruction in social studies. Second, I shall compare and contrast one of the most visible current reform proposals--the upgrading of geographic education--with what we have learned about social studies curriculum in practice. This analysis will also draw on a recent empirical study of elementary school geographic education. Finally, there will be some consideration given to the implications of the research discussed for policy and practice.

What Have We Learned?

My aim in this section is to outline some important recent findings about social studies curriculum and instruction obtained from three qualitative studies. It is worth noting that one of these studies does not claim to be educational criticism (McCutcheon, 1981). Nonetheless, the three studies share a strong interpretive inclination--they all focus on the illumination of educational significance, not just ethnographic description (2). In particular, the studies compare and contrast some idea of what ought to happen with what does happen and then proceed to consider the educational significance of these similarities and differences. It should become plain that the issues raised in these three studies address central concerns in curriculum and instruction.

The first study is by Gail McCutcheon (1981). As with the remaining studies to be discussed, I shall make no attempt to summarize McCutcheon's findings. Rather I shall consider a few crucial issues and their significance for curriculum and instruction.

McCutcheon and her colleagues examined elementary school teachers' planning in social studies. For example, what do teachers consider when they plan? How do they go about the business of planning? McCutcheon found that teachers seldom planned in the rational, objectives-first manner prescribed in most teacher education courses. Rather teachers' planning "involves a complex, simultaneous juggling of many questions and information about past practice, subject matter, children, and materials" (McCutcheon, 1981, p. 64). Particularly interesting is McCutcheon's conclusion that, even though teachers' planning does not follow the objectives-first model, it is far from simple. Is, then, insistence by supervisors and teacher educators on

objectives-first dysfunctional? McCutcheon seems to think so. She suggests it may be more productive to assist preservice and inservice teachers to reflect on the planning practices that teachers actually use, and to illuminate the nature of such practical knowledge through "descriptive and critical studies" (McCutcheon, 1981, p. 61).

A second study deals with citizenship education in the elementary grades. Specifically, Meg Rogers and Bruce Uhrmacher (1986) "look at how citizenship education has been infused into the entire curriculum" (p. 1) in the Willow Springs School (a fictitious name), a mainly white, upper-middle class school in California. Through prolonged observation in five classes at four grade levels they "were surprised to find the emphasis . . . not on memorizing particulars about 'great Americans: past and present' through traditional, readings, movies or bulletin board displays" (Rogers and Uhrmacher, 1986, p. 2). Rather, Rogers and Uhrmacher "observed democratic processes . . . being acted out on a daily basis" (1986, p. 2).

The significance of this finding lies in the fact that the available evidence suggests that most social studies programs fail to develop democratic citizenship competencies identified in program rationales. Thus, in contrast to many other studies (e.g., Goodlad, 1984), Rogers and Uhrmacher report that the skills necessary for active citizenship are being taught. Why this discrepancy exists is not clear. It may be, given that Rogers and Uhrmacher only studied an "upscale" school, that they were witnessing what Kathleen Wilcox calls "differential socialization" (1982). That is that Willow Springs' upper middle-class students were being socialized to assume

leadership roles in the adult society (in contrast to lower class children who are socialized to follow orders). Any firm answer to this question, however, is not provided by Rogers and Uhrmacher.

What is more familiar in the Rogers and Uhrmacher study is that substantive subject matter from the disciplines was often lacking in social studies programs. Although emphasis on skills such as group processes, negotiation, decision making and the like are well and good, acquainting children with their world also requires "a fundamental grounding in geography, history and political processes" (Rogers and Uhrmacher, 1986, p. 13). This grounding, the researchers observe, was often too thin.

A third study examines curriculum consonance (Thornton, in press)--the relationships between what teachers plan to teach, what ensues in the classroom, and what students take away. Like McCutcheon with planning and Rogers and Uhrmacher with citizenship competencies, the consonance study sought to make the often taken-for-granted problematic. Why is it, given widespread appreciation that curricula are seldom if ever entirely consonant, that the phenomenon has rarely been studied? What does a highly consonant curriculum look like? Why do teachers proclaim one thing and do another?

The study was conducted at a northern California high school. Methods included pre- and post-instruction interviews with academically-representative students, pre-instruction interviews with three teachers, observations over three months in classrooms, and wherever possible, immersion in the culture of the school. The three, experienced U.S. history teachers were all observed teaching the same unit, to similar students, using the same textbook.

One significant finding of the study was that there were often contradictions within the intended curriculum. In other words, teachers sometimes planned instructional activities that were at odds with their broad goals. One teacher, for example, was an advocate of inquiry learning; he was more concerned with the process of how his students learned than with the particular subject matter they learned. Yet this same teacher's plans for learning activities, materials, instructional strategies, and evaluation procedures were centered on teacher-led, question-and-answer instruction and seatwork based on the textbook's "check-up" questions. Content, not inquiry, counted.

What do these three studies tell us? Their principal significance, from my perspective, is that they present a view from the inside: For example, what do teachers consider important? What theories, explicit or implicit, underlie their actions? How do teachers go about their work? What influence does this have on students? Although we know a great deal about social studies practice in general--avoidance of controversial subject matter, overreliance on passive learning strategies, apparent student apathy toward the subject, and so on--we know much less about what these practices look like in real classrooms. Since educational events always take place in a particular context, not in general, images of the problems and possibilities of social studies curriculum in practice provide a basis for deliberation about the practical world of real classrooms. As Joseph Schwab reminded us, "The specific not only adds to the generic; it also modulates it" (1969, p. 12).

Reform and Practice in Geographic Education

The insights about social studies in real classrooms garnered so far will now be applied to the case of geographic education. The case for reform in geographic education is surely a strong one. For generations geographic education has been neglected in the United States. Americans are apparently among the least geographically literate peoples in the industrialized world (Committee on Geographic Education, 1984; Committee on Trade and Foreign Relations, 1987; Muessig, 1987; Nelson, 1986; Torney-Purta, 1986). Significantly for our purposes, however, reform initiatives, while extensive, have followed fairly conventional approaches. For example, some states (e.g., California) have placed more emphasis on teaching geography, workshops for teachers have been organized (Salter, 1986), and the Geographic Education National Implementation Project's (GENIP) Committee on K-6 Geography issued some guidelines for curriculum development (1987).

Although these conventional paths to educational change are not my concern here, it is noteworthy that the insights described above--for example, teachers' concerns often differ radically from policymakers' concerns, teachers seldom use the objectives-first model, and so forth--do not figure prominently in the reform proposals. Before turning to the significance of this absence, it should be informative to consider what the reformers are proposing.

Broadly speaking, it appears that most of the currently visible reformers have a similar view of geographic education in mind. For the want of an agreed-upon descriptor, I shall call the reformers' view discipline-based geography. This view of geography contrasts with widely-held views that geographic knowledge consists of sundry isolated facts about the world, say,

knowing the location of Japan, the major tributaries of the Mississippi, the names of the fifty state capitals, or the major exports of Brazil. Rather, discipline-based geography is concerned with not just where things are located but also with explanation of why they are located there (Committee on Geographic Education, 1984, p. 2; see also Salter, 1986, p. 9).

Discipline-based geography derives from the key themes of the discipline of geography as conceived by academic geographers. Geographers such as Salvatore J. Natoli and Christopher L. Salter argue that discipline-based geography should be the basis for school geography curriculum.

Although this apparent consensus among the reformers bodes well for curriculum reform, we should not hastily conclude that surely change cannot be far behind. Despite their manifest merits, reform documents such as Guidelines for Geographic Education (1984) do not represent the first time that discipline-based geography, or its close cousins such as "relationship geography" (James & Crape, 1968), have been proposed. On the contrary, Raymond H. Muessig (1987) observes that discipline-based geography (or its cousins) has been advocated by geographic educators for at least a century. In other words, however worthy discipline-based geography may be as the basis for school geography curriculum, it essentially mirrors what many geographic educators have long advocated. This suggests that the problems of geographic education have more to do with the failure of reforms to find their way into curriculum practice than with a shortage of worthy curriculum theories. And it is at this point, I suggest, that attention to critical understandings of curriculum in practice are relevant, indeed essential, to informed policymaking and to the prospects for curriculum change.

Let us consider for a moment what presently happens when geography is taught in elementary classrooms. Once again, I do not intend to describe this study of fourth-grade geography in any detail (Thornton and Wenger, in preparation) but rather to use some of its findings for illustrative purposes. In particular, I want to point out the gulf between the kind of curriculum proposed by reformers and current practices. A gulf that has considerable consequence for reforming geographic education.

To begin with, this study replicated several findings from the three qualitative studies discussed above. First, like McCutcheon (1981), we found teachers often did not employ the objectives-first model of curriculum planning. Rather teachers thought more in terms of activities and available materials. As one teacher related: "I like to think what activities we're going to have in [the unit] first so that . . . [I think of] the interesting things involved . . . . I really like to have more resources than just the textbook." Second, like Rogers and Uhrmacher (1986) (also see Cornbleth, Korth, and Dorow, 1983; McNeil, 1986), our study revealed that the intellectual substance of subject matter was often not a priority for teachers. In other words, skills were often seen as an end in themselves (rather than as a means of understanding geographic concepts) and low-level, factual information was the focus of many lessons and tests. For example, in one quiz where students were required to provide one word answers, the following questions were typical of those asked:

#1. The area of the United States that produces the most corn.

#2. Cattle used for milk.

#3. The line where the land seems to meet the sky.

#4. North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas

Third, as in my study of curriculum consonance, we found that teachers' broad intentions were often modified by other factors. One teacher told us that she did not believe that children effectively learned social studies by merely reading the textbook and answering its questions. Yet, she felt that "accountability [is] heavier in other areas than in social studies" and to save time for other subjects, "It's easy to say, we'll read the chapter and answer the questions."

We found not only replication of findings from other studies but also other information pertinent to reforming geographic education. The reformers' proposals focus on important geographic themes and concepts. But elementary school teachers, even in the fourth-grade where most of the content is drawn from geography, teach social studies rather than geography. The teachers we interviewed and observed seldom considered the particularities of geography as a distinct discipline. Rather than beginning with the discipline, teachers selected information, skills, and concepts as they seemed to fit into their units. Attention was given to sequential learning of geographic skills and concepts, but this attention was much less systematic than the reformers propose.

Teachers' conceptions of the boundaries of the discipline of geography were usually vague. Often they spoke of geography as synonymous with map skills and locations. Moreover, in addition to uncertainty about just what the discipline of geography entailed, these teachers largely thought of the

subject in terms of how they would teach it. When asked what she thought her students would, in the long run, retain from learning geography, one teacher put it this way.

> I think with our desert unit right now they're all going to remember [the] diaramas or the reports that they're doing because some of the diaramas have come in and they're real excited about that. They really remember the hands-on things, or children seem to relate very well to the animals, or you can talk about children in a certain [region's] schools: What school is like for them as opposed to themselves. I think they remember just if there are a lot of rivers in a place, or if there's mountains in a place, a lot of snow, if it's cold or hot. They remember the climate, just key things like [that] the kids seem to recall.

Furthermore, these teachers argued that their students would have difficulty studying discipline-based geography. One teacher remarked of discipline-based geography that it would not be "a feasible place to start . . . [because] the children don't have any basics . . . like, 'What is a mountain'." Another teacher similarly remarked that "some conceptualization . . . has to take place before the students" would be "able" to learn discipline-based geography.

What are some of the bases, then, that teachers did use to decide what to teach in geography? Mostly their criteria were practical and child-centered. For example, one teacher stressed the importance of resources beyond the book. She related how she tried to obtain "filmstrips or some type of visuals" and "guest speakers" to enrich her units beyond the textbook's

coverage. Another important criterion for curriculum decisionmaking for all the teachers, as has already been implied, was whether the subject matter contained concepts and skills that they thought their students were capable of learning.

> You really have to use your discretion and decide what your children can absorb, and what you feel they have to have. Are they going to get this later on? Maybe you can just cover it lightly and let them just have a basic understanding rather than a mastery of it.

In a similar vein, another teacher remarked:

> I figure that the kids are not going to learn every objective, every piece of information, in the end. I guess sometimes if I read through it I try to think what I want to get across to them, the key points. And I check mark my teacher's edition, or I'll write down a little outline for myself.

Conclusion

It should now be apparent that the concerns of the reformers and the concerns of elementary school teachers are frequently worlds apart. Nonetheless, in my judgment, discipline-based geography could contribute a great deal to reinvigorating geographic education in the United States. In particular, discipline-based geography provides a well-conceived and sensible scope and sequence. Given that a lack of attention to continuity of subject-matter has long been a problem in social studies programs, discipline-based geography has something to offer.

Yet, I remain unconvinced that geography "[i]deally...should be a separate school subject" (Committee on Geographic Education, 1984, p.9). At least at the elementary school level, we need to ask, "Should the disciplines be the organizational hub of curriculum decisionmaking"? As Muessig concludes, "the geography that it is integrated into the best social studies units may be richer and more useful because students experienced it in a broad, meaningful context" (1987, p. 529). Barbara J. Winston, who is both a geographer and a teacher educator, observes that teaching geography well entails not only understanding of the discipline but also understanding of "the intellectual processes involved in human thought" and "child development considerations" (Winston, 1986, p. 53). There is no reason to conclude that geographers' conception of their discipline should be the primary basis for curriculum design. Although many elementary school teachers appear to have a poor grasp of the discipline of geography, they also properly recognize the importance of other matters -- children's experiences, children's affective growth, and learning across subjects -- that extend beyond the concerns of the discipline being studied. In the parlance of the last decade, geographic education is "basic." But that does not mean that simply embracing discipline-based geography will, in and of itself, solve the educational problem of geographic illiteracy.

In closing, what does educational criticism offer to policy and practice? I see three major contributions. First, educational criticism offers a view from the inside--we must first know what it is like on the firing line before we attempt change. Second, educational criticism provides not just description but also attempts to apprise us of the educational

significance of what unfolds. Finally, educational criticism presents cases of real classrooms--both images of the possible and the commonplaces of the daily grind--that provide vicarious experience for the outsider. In these ways, educational criticism helps assure that policy and practice are mutually informed.

Notes

1. This paper was presented as part of a Division K symposium, What Educational Criticism Can Contribute to Policy and Practice, at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, New Orleans, April, 1988. I am grateful to William B. Stanley and R. Neill Wenger for their thoughtful criticisms of an earlier draft.
2. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a variety of qualitative methodologies. One characteristic of educational criticism, and some related methodologies, is a commitment to the illumination of educational significance. Although some anthropologists argue that the illumination of educational significance is a proper research role, others maintain that anthropologists should restrict their role to description. For a discussion of these issues, see Thornton (1987).

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